

THAT IS THAT

December 29, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church

"And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen..."

: Scripture

Psalm 111  
Isaiah 53:1-6  
Luke 2:15-20

We never learn what happened next to the shepherds. Was life any different for them? Did they become followers of Jesus, 30 years later?

Or did they, upon returning -- praising and glorifying God for all they had seen -- simply resume shepherding with a pleasant memory to keep?

The permanent effect of the celebration of Christ's birth is the concern. What difference has it made?

One of the pieces I try to remember to read at Christmas is For the Time Being, W. H. Auden's Christmas Oratorio. I have a number of favorite passages. One of them -- the one which always sounds like the text for the day on the first Sunday after Christmas, is this one:

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree  
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --  
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up the attic.  
The holly and the mistletoe, must be taken down and burnt,  
And the children got ready for school.

There are enough leftovers to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --  
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,  
Stayed up so late, attempted -- quite unsuccessfully --  
to love all of our relatives, and in general  
Grossly overestimated our powers.  
Once again as in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility, once again we have sent him away  
Begging though to remain his disobedient servant..."

It takes such a long time to get ready. To live on Michigan Avenue, in fact, is to have the best seats in the house to watch Americans prepare for the event in ways that are determined, committed, but also creative, breathtakingly beautiful, painstakingly elaborate. With the innocent eyes of newcomers we watched -- and heard last August the talk about the twinkling lights, and saw the first wreath and candle in September, and observed the preparations for the great tree, with equal delight -- in November, and cheered on and encouraged

the electricians who decorated the trees on Michigan Avenue before Thanksgiving. The church, of course, has traditionally observed Advent, a four week period of preparation, but we -- along with the rest of the populace -- received our Christmas Savings check in October which, all things considered, is probably the tangible sign that serious business is about to commence.

I do not lament the extended preparation time. In fact, I welcome those earliest signs of Christmas as cheerful, tantalizing reminders that something glorious is coming in the future. What interests me is how quickly it is over. The older tradition of the church is to observe Advent for four weeks and then to celebrate Christmas -- Christmastide -- for twelve days, until Epiphany, the date tradition assigns for the arrival in Bethlehem of the Magi. Reality, however, comes with the advertising supplements that fell out of the paper on Christmas morning, announcing an hour before we opened our gifts -- after Christmas sales, and showing some clothing items with a decidedly spring look to them.

Malcolm Boyd wondered once whether it ever arrives at all. "On December 24 it hasn't come -- you have to wait 'til Christmas to open the presents. On December 26 it is over -- we've got to clear up the mess and take the tree down. As a result we don't let Christmas come at all. Because, by its very nature, it cannot be contained within a tight time period, any more than God can be bottled-up inside a church building to be visited once a week for an hour." (Malcolm Boyd)

We made a substantial investment in preparing for Christmas: financial, physical, emotional and spiritual. And sometime last Wednesday it came and went. That is that. Today, inevitably, we feel let down, exhausted, washed out, drained. And yet, I wonder if this may not be one of the most important Sundays of the year for us? It is the day, I would submit, to heed W. H. Auden's British cynicism about the cultural festivity, the "seeing once again the actual vision and failing...to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility."

If there is any sense in which we Christians are the stewards of this feast, it is our special responsibility, it seems to me to remind ourselves, and anyone else who happens to be listening in, that there is more to this story than the birth. I am not proposing that fashionable elitism which insists on theological purity and scorns Christmas celebrations which are not as aesthetically proper as our tastes dictate. We don't own the celebration after all. The birth itself -- and its first celebration occurred at a significant distance from institutions of religion. Our task is simply to remember that there is a significant part of the whole story which occurs after the birth.

Staying close to the Old Testament is a good way to avoid entrapment in superficiality. The lesson this morning, for instance, is part of a letter written to the exiled Jewish Community in Babylon in the sixth century before Christ. In it the prophet promises deliverance from their captivity but then warns, with absolute realism, that people will not always be pleased when God's servant appears. "Who has believed what we have heard?", he inquired. God's activity will not be universally appealing. In fact, the popular expectations people harbored about God's coming might prevent them from recognizing the event when it happened.

"He grew up before him like a young plant, and like a dry root out of dry ground: he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." (Isaiah 53:2)

Suddenly we are removed, not only from the superficiality of the cultural Christmas, but from the elegant simplicity of the nativity to confront the disturbing complexity of a man who didn't fit the pattern: a Messiah who didn't look much like a Messiah. Suddenly we are jerked away from sentiment of a baby with universal human appeal, to the uncomfortable adversary who always seemed to end up on the wrong side of every issue.

And the prophet doesn't let it go there. Not only won't most people recognize him, not only will God's servant have to deal with powerful people who don't like the way he looks, acts, wears his hair, and dresses but hatred and violence will be directed to him. Suddenly we are facing the distinct possibility of a cross several decades down the road:

"He was despised and rejected...  
A man of sorrows acquainted with grief: And as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." (Isaiah 53:3)

One of the enduring lessons we must always learn from our Hebrew roots, and our Jewish brothers and sisters, is that the religious experience is not all sweetness and light: that getting involved with God can be very risky business, that happiness and success and fulfillment do not always result from piety, television religion notwithstanding.

In the meantime, God's servant, the prophet warned, may not be recognizable, may not be what people expect God's servant to look like. If there is meaningful contemporary figure in the birth narrative it is surely the Innkeeper. In the midst of some pretty heavenly goings-on, he is utterly believable. He sounds like us. He did what the prophet said people would do when God's servant appeared -- failed to recognize him. He had other things on his mind: cashing in on the unexpected year-end bonanza precipitated by the census of all the travelers returning home. We can't fault him for that: it was his business. Besides he didn't turn them away. To his everlasting credit there was the milk of human kindness in him to provide shelter, however crude.

But he didn't recognize the significance of what was happening: couldn't see the activity of God in the mundane events playing themselves out in front of his eyes and in his stable out back.

That was the essence of the prophet's warning five and one half centuries earlier. It is still the problem. If the New Testament is to be trusted God is at work in the world where people are loved and accepted for who they are, and affirmed for what they can be. The Kingdom of God is in the world, the New Testament teaches, wherever hungry people are fed, and naked people clothed and homeless people sheltered, and blind people given sight, and sick people healed. If

God is in this world of ours, in ways more profound than a plastic Jesus in a department store manger, the Bible teaches, it will be where people believe -- not as an intellectual exercise or even an emotional spasm -- but where because of their belief justice is equal, and human dignity is celebrated, and oppressed people are set free. Needless to say, those are not ideas upon which to build a popular program. Those ideas don't attract much of a constituency these days, politically, socially, religiously. Yet they are the characteristics of the kingdom which broke into the history of the world with this amazing birth. They are the ideas the man, the baby became espoused, lived and for which he died.

It was fashionable a while ago to lament the worldliness and secularism of Christmas and to avoid writing "Christmas" in its abbreviated form -- with an "X" for Christ. It was a Christian's duty, it was suggested, to confine the festivities to remembering this birth of Jesus and to remain unsullied by Santa, Rudolph, and all that. But that's not the problem: never has been: never will be. Christians ought to be the first to cheer an infusion of generosity and peace and love and the experience of childlike wonder. That's not the problem. Besides -- the cultural celebration is perfectly capable of appropriating the nativity if it will make people happy -- or sell more stuff. No one has trouble with baby Jesus, except King Herod and it can be argued that he alone in the nativity drama recognizes Jesus for who he was. Everyone can feel good about a manger baby. It's the man who gets himself and everyone around him in trouble.

Every year, a variation on that theme emerges as someone sues a school system or a municipality for using overtly Christmas symbols or songs or customs in the public domain. And while it is always a jolt, emotionally, to have to deal with the possible offensiveness of our dearest symbols to some people, legally and constitutionally, there really isn't much argument. The founders of this country had had quite enough of government sponsored religion. One of the better, more creative and stunningly successful ideas was separation of church and state and the freedom of every citizen to be or not to be religious. Recently, however, those who wish to preserve the right of the Christian community in our culture to enjoy public sponsorship, have advanced an argument that is disturbing, namely that the cross is not, after all, a religious symbol at all, and the star of Bethlehem is only a bit of folk lore, not at all specifically and precisely Christian. That, it seems to me, is the real danger about which people who care for the integrity of the faith -- ought to be exercised. If we have to deny the specific content of our symbols, in order to have them displayed at City Hall -- we have, in an ultimate way, caved in to the world.

Popular novelist, Joseph Heller, has dealt with this issue over the years with great wit but also great power. Heller happens to be Jewish. His novel, Catch 22, is acclaimed for its thoughtfulness and scathing cynicism about war-making. Listen to several paragraphs: a chaplain to a bomber group in Italy has been summoned by the commanding officer:

"We were speaking about conducting religious services in the briefing room before every mission. Is there any reason why we can't?"

"No sir," the chaplain mumbled.

"Then we'll begin with this afternoon's mission." The Colonel's hostility softened as he applied himself to details..."Now I want you to give a lot of thought to the kind of prayers we're going to say. I don't want anything heavy or sad. I'd like you to keep it light and snappy, something that will send the boys out feeling pretty good. Do you know what I mean? I don't want any of this Kingdom of God or Valley of Death stuff. That's all too negative. What are you making such a sour face for?"

"I'm sorry, sir," the chaplain stammered. "I happened to be thinking of the Twenty Third Psalm just as you said that"...

"That's the one I was referring to. It's out. ...why can't we take a more positive approach? Couldn't we pray for a tighter bomb pattern?"

"Well, yes, sir, I suppose so," the chaplain answered hesitantly. "You shouldn't even need me if that's all you wanted to do. You could do that yourself."

"I know I could," the Colonel responded tartly. "But what do you think you're here for?... Your job is to lead us in prayer, and from now on you're going to lead us in a prayer for a tighter bomb pattern before every mission. Is that clear? I think a tighter bomb pattern is something worth praying for... I suppose we'll have to keep you waiting outside until the briefing is over, because all that information is classified. We can slip you in while Major Darnley is synchronizing the watches... We'll allocate about a minute and a half for you on the Schedule."

One of the great challenges to the church, even more dangerous because it is friendly -- not hostile -- is a vague, amorphous religiosity that feels good about the birth of a baby but doesn't know about, or want to know about, or if it knows -- care about -- the man the baby became and the ideas he espoused.

That, it seems to me, is the issue that presents itself on this Sunday after Christmas. What makes that birth so shatteringly beautiful, so unspeakably lovely, is that the child lived to adulthood, and in adulthood taught a whole new way of seeing the world and other people. What makes the birth so astonishing is that the baby lived with his parents, through childhood and adolescence into manhood, and in time was so full of the strong love of God and power and spirit of God that he gave his whole life, obeying his sense of God's will, and actually lived out his revolutionary new ideas, loving so thoroughly people couldn't believe their eyes -- even when his radical and strong love took him to the cross.

"The manger scene is only one stopping place on this journey of faith," Isabel Anders wrote in the recent Christian Century. "The tranquility of the manger moves us deeply, but it should never transfix us. The rest of Christ's journey -- and our journey -- remains." (Christian Century, 12/18-25/85, p. 1168)

Centuries ago, when the church's Christmas and the culture's were synonymous, the birth was regarded more consistently as the beginning of a larger and profound story. Ms. Anders cites a 16th century carol:

"This little Babe so few days old,  
Is come to rifle satan's fold;  
All hell doth at his presence quake,  
Though he himself for cold do shake."

There is wisdom and power in that... that image of all hell quaking at the presence of a shivering baby.

That enormous claim is what we have made once again. That is Auden's "actual vision" which we have briefly seen. The word has been made flesh. The light shines in the darkness. The infant Jesus became the Lord Christ and summons us to follow him and, in his power, commands us to be converted, to turn around, to know God's unconditional love and to live it out in our lives -- as he did -- no less than that! We are called to salvation and because of our salvation to be bearers of God's peace, to hold fast to the good, to strengthen the fainthearted and support the weak, to honor all people, to love and serve God and rejoice in the power of the spirit.

What we have dared celebrate is the life of God poured into the life of our world in the life of one who is our brother, who showed us how to live with both peace and conviction, and how to die with confidence and courage.

What we have sung and shared in seasonal greetings, and invested in our gift giving, and privately wept about again is the love of God come among us -- come to give us life, come to save us...

"Now we must dismantle the tree  
Putting the decorations back into  
their cardboard boxes...  
The holly and the mistletoe must be  
taken down and burnt.  
...we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility..."

That is that... Or is it?

Lord God of all history, all nations, all people: we have seen the actual vision. We give thanks to you for the goodness and loveliness of the celebration. We are grateful for love affirmed, generosity expressed and reconciliation experienced. Having celebrated, give us the courage now to be disciples of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.